

# The New York Times

## THEATER REVIEW

# *A Kitchen of Kung Fu in a Korean Confection*

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October 1, 2003

Music, mayhem and magic are only a few of the ingredients in the savory stew of skillful, high-energy, good fun that opens the new season at the New Victory Theater.

The attraction is "Cookin'," an import from Korea, where it is said to be the country's longest-running, most popular show. If theater history records kitchen-sink dramas, "Cookin'," known in Korea as "Nanta" (translated as "To Strike Recklessly"), qualifies as kitchen-sink comedy. This 90-minute intermissionless show takes its audience behind the scenes in a restaurant where the four-member crew, including an untested novice, are under orders from the manager to prepare an elaborate wedding banquet in an hour. On one side of the stage a clock ticks off the minutes.

What happens is part food fight and part percussion festival, with razor sharp knives beating out frenetic rhythms while cabbage leaves, cucumbers, carrots and onions fly around the stage. Ladles, spoons and chopsticks, serving as drumsticks, find the music in vats, pots, woks, plastic wastebaskets, bins and cutting boards. Plates fly. Melons become basketballs. A fowl escapes from an oven. And an invisible but very audible fly buzzes into the soup that a couple from the audience, costumed as



bride and groom, are asked to sample. That's not all. Members of the audience are enlisted in a dumpling-making race reminiscent

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of one of Jackie Gleason's or Lucille Ball's assembly line routines. Steam swirls, cooking smells fill the theater (at least for a while), and mixed with the music, which extends to rock and jazz, are slapstick comedy, a kung fu

battle with broomsticks and deft choreography.

Under the direction of Seung Whan Song, who conceived this entertainment, the appealing cast of "Cookin'," which continues through Oct. 19, carries out its demanding, multitasking assignments admirably. Kang Il Kim plays the manager; Choo Ja Seo is the kitchen staff's sole woman; Won Hae Kim is the head chef; the bearded Ho Yeoul Sul is billed as the Sexy Food Dude; and Bum Chan Lee, with his Jackie Chan smile, is the novice who happens to be the manager's mischievous nephew.

"Cookin'" gives off good vibes.